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The development studies divide: fierce fault lines or fruitful frictions?

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ABSTRACT

The concept of *development* has deeply divided the social sciences concerned with peoples and earth's future. For many researchers and practitioners, variants of development are crucial normative cornerstones to frame and guide research and policy. Many critical scholars and activists associate the term with colonial, capitalist, extractivist, and patriarchal threats, and see it as the root cause of environmental degradation. In short, some study development as a solution, others as the problem. I call this rift the *Development Studies Divide*. After tracing diverse disciplinary roots, I discuss where the fault lines run and whether fruitful frictions could enrich the future of (critical) development studies. Despite stark differences in ideological, epistemological, and conceptual orientations, there is room for mutual learning, specifically across methodologies. A reflexive integration of critical perspectives with quantitative methods can substantiate critical claims beyond isolated case studies, address them at larger scales, and generate robust knowledge on alternatives to development beyond largely theory-driven proposals. It could also correct global empirical analyses that become problematic when their assumptions and interpretations are not grounded in the diverse histories, worldviews, and values of non-Western realities.

1. Introduction

The concept of *development* has deeply divided the social sciences concerned with peoples and earth's future. For many scholars and practitioners of conventional development approaches, for global institutions and funders such as the United Nations and the World Bank, and for most national governments, variants of the concept, such as sustainable development or human development, are important normative frames to guide policy, implement actions and fund and interpret research.

At the same time, many researchers and scholar activists across the fields of Political Ecology, Ecological Economics, Critical Agrarian Studies, Critical Geography, Feminist, Decolonial and Critical Development Studies view the idea and practice of state and corporate driven development as synonymous with colonial, capitalist, patriarchal, and extractivist threats. For them, it is precisely *development* that needs to be tackled to understand why marginalized communities across the globe fail to thrive and remain in poverty, why ecosystems are deteriorating, and why climate change is advancing faster than expected, against the backdrop of false solutions of green growth.[2]

This *Insight* examines what I term the *Development Studies Divide*: the ruptures across normative stances and ideologies, epistemologies, methodologies, concepts, and funding sources and hegemonic positions in the global development apparatus. While some aim for development as a solution, others study development as the main problem to be tackled.

What does this divide mean for local communities and for those working toward better futures for peoples and the earth? Are there only fierce fault lines between different schools of thought or is there potential for *fruitful frictions* (Zimmerer, 2015) that could provoke mutual learning? Could such learning enable us to address shared concerns such as poverty, health, climate change and environmental degradation in original and meaningful ways, despite sometimes contrasting understandings of their root causes and the proposals being made to address them?

Here, I reflect on these questions by drawing on my own work

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[2] By "many researchers and scholar activists" I do not refer to a specific group of authors, but to a wide range of people from different backgrounds, inside and outside academia, who repeatedly voiced concerns over the idea and concept of development at critical social science conferences and other related fora I have attended.

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ethnography: my personal experiences and observations from working with researchers and development practitioners, and my academic engagement with critical perspectives on development.[3] My reading of these debates involve some heuristic simplifications used to illustrate some of the differences that currently provoke frictions. Rather than treating them as strict binaries, I consider these tendencies part of a spectrum of perspectives within contemporary scholarship concerned with development. I describe them here to identify some points of contention that significantly shape current debates. Despite stark differences in ideological, epistemological and conceptual positions, I contend there is room for mutual learning, specifically across methodologies.

The next Section 2 briefly delves into some of the disciplinary origins of current debates, while Section 3 describes how current fault lines and friction manifest in day-to-day work of scholars and practitioners. Finally, I argue that these differences are not only oppositional but also offer some complementarity: the questions and claims posed by critical traditions often exceed the evidence-building capacities of their methods, while the tools of conventional development approaches frequently operate within too narrow definitions and understandings of problems and solutions. If done carefully, a reflexive integration of critical qualitative perspectives with quantitative assessment approaches holds enormous potential to address old problems in new and original ways.

2. The development studies divide: disciplinary origins

Debates about development have emerged from various streams within the critical social, economic, and environmental sciences.[4] Post-development studies played a foundational role in establishing critiques of conventional development approaches, resulting from post-war development thinking and economics. Wolfgang Sachs' (1992) *Development Dictionary*, and Arturo Escobar's (1995) book *Encountering Development* were key foundational works. From social, economic and cultural perspectives, Sachs' work critiqued the Western economic models and concepts of development and their failures to reduce global inequality while producing environmental degradation. Escobar, deeply rooted in Anthropology and drawing on Foucault, deconstructed the origins of development concepts such as *poverty* or *progress*, showing how they serve exploitative systems, ultimately reinforcing Western power. Escobar's work was also foundational to post-structuralist approaches in current Political Ecology. Both works, in conversation with intellectual traditions such as Postcolonialism (Said, 1978), Dependency Theory and the development of underdevelopment (Frank, 1989), Ecofeminism (Mies and Shiva, 1993), (Neo)marxism (e.g. Harvey, 2006), and the rise of broad fields such as Political Ecology (Hope et al., 2025), Critical Agrarian Studies (Akram-Lodhi et al., 2021), or Critical Development Studies (Veltmeyer and Delgado Wise, 2018), gave rise to a vibrant field of critiques of conventional development approaches.

Critiques of development were also prominent in the environmental and economic sciences. Ecological Economics rose as a response to mainstream economics and its pursuit of sustainable development, relying predominantly on greening economic growth. The field questioned the underlying assumptions that human-made capital like technology (e.g., water desalination facilities) could eventually compensate for irreversible losses in natural capital (e.g., loss of ecological freshwater supply) (Daly, 1990). By rooting economics in the physical laws of entropy (Georgescu-Roegen, 1971), and by proposing biophysical accounting (Gerber and Scheidel, 2018), value pluralism and multi-criteria approaches instead of cost-benefit analysis (Martinez-Alier et al., 1998), Ecological Economics offered a new paradigm and alternative to neoclassical welfare and development economics (Gowdy and Erickson, 2005). Merged with Political Ecology concerns, it furthermore complemented (and sometimes opposed) Political Ecology's post-structuralist explanations of environmental conflicts with materialist perspectives. Scholars linked global development to environmental degradation and livelihood loss through analyses of biophysical resource flows and extraction patterns, i.e., the social metabolism (Muradian et al., 2012). Yet, political ecological economics research also drew attention to how such processes were contested by grassroots movements and an environmentalism of the poor (Martinez-Alier, 2002). They highlighted the incommensurable valuation languages rooted in culture rather than cost-benefit perspectives (Villamayor-Tomás and Muradian, 2023).

Drawing on Ecological Economics theory, on Post-development scholarship and inspired by activists and social movements, Degrowth and Postgrowth have emerged as dynamic fields of critique of conventional development, including green growth and sustainable development (Demaria et al., 2013, D'Alisa et al., 2015; Kallis et al., 2025). With a rapidly growing scholarship in the Global North, there are also increasing (and critical) discussions of Degrowth in the Global South (Gräbner-Radkowitsch and Strunk, 2023). Having close connections with Political Ecology and Environmental Justice studies (Akbulut et al., 2019), Post-development, and Critical Agrarian Studies (Gerber, 2020), Degrowth joined calls for co-creating a *Pluriverse* (Kothari et al., 2019). This entails recognizing and gathering diverse transformative alternatives to (and not "of") development. Such alternatives are rooted in radically different worldviews and practices, putting principles such as community, autonomy, justice and ecology first.

The result has been a rich and heterogeneous field of critique of the conventional development approaches represented by hegemonic institutions and global agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals. There is some convergence among these critical approaches, and Political Ecology has often acted as an umbrella field, facilitating dialogue and collaboration. Nonetheless, there is still much potential for further intellectual exchange and integration within the critical social sciences, which could significantly strengthen their voice within the global development apparatus.

Finally, scholarship critical of conventional approaches has itself faced a range of critiques, particularly in relation to more neopopulist strands of post-development scholarship (Ziai, 2004, 2017). As Ziai summarizes, "development" has often been portrayed as a monolithic project, with critiques lacking nuance and overlooking the field's heterogeneity and evolution (as discussed later). Furthermore, while critical strands have been effective in calling out problems with development, they have been relatively weak in articulating alternative programs. Only recently, one can observe a stronger "constructive turn" in Political Ecology, marked by a shift from a primary focus on critiquing mainstream approaches toward the articulation of concrete alternatives. However, many of the discussed alternatives remain narrowly centered on social movements and grassroots initiatives, often engaging with them in an ideological and insufficiently critical manner. This is not uncommonly accompanied (perhaps less in textbooks than in public fora such as conferences) by a certain degree of romanticization and essentialization of local communities and their resource-use practices. Limitations also strongly concern methods and their evidence-building capacities at larger scales, as I will discuss later in more detail. Finally, Ziai (2017) also notes that critiques of development may themselves

[3] As for my own positionality, I consider myself an interdisciplinary scholar rooted in Political Ecology, Critical Agrarian Studies, and Ecological Economics, with an interest in learning how to better understand and ultimately transform the urgent social environmental challenges of today's world.

[4] The debates about the meaning, the purpose and implication of "development" were also articulated as the distinction between D/development with "big D" or little "D" (Lewis, 2019). "Big D" Development refers to the idea of development as reflected in Western, Post-World War II modernisation interventions in the Global South, whereas "little D" development describes the uneven social outcomes, the winners and losers, and the creative and destructive processes linked to the unfolding of Capitalism.

become "paternalistic", particularly when critical scholars, from privileged positions, speak about the poor's "real needs", while dismissing their expressed desire for development on ideological grounds.

3. Fierce fault lines or fruitful frictions?

While critiques of conventional development have consolidated over time, the latter has not remained static but has undergone major transformations, partly to address emerging concerns. Yusuf et al., 2009 describe in *"Development Economics through the Decades"* how the World Development Reports (WDRs), initially focusing predominantly on economic growth, were later expanded to address the role of institutions and governance, knowledge and education, and environmental issues. Gender issues have received increasing attention, such as in the 2012 WDR (World Bank, 2012). Poverty reduction strategies have increasingly targeted inequality and approached poverty in the light of human development, focusing on health, education and decent living standards and other concerns, rather than overall economic growth (UNDP, 2010). In this context, Amartya Sen's (1999) and Martha Nussbaum's (2013) work on Capabilities, which focuses on people's real opportunities to live a healthy, valued and meaningful life, led to a major shift in understanding and measuring poverty. Their work has also been taken up and shaped debates in the more critical fields, perhaps most strongly in Ecological Economics (e.g. Scheidel, 2013; Pelenc and Ballet, 2015). The transformations of the field brought conventional development studies and critical scholarship closer in some aspects, particularly regarding the questionable role of economic growth as a central development objective, the recognition of diverse social and cultural values, and the acknowledgement of justice as an important concern. However, old and new disagreements continue among different schools of thought. They span across ideological, epistemological, conceptual, and methodological debates, as I briefly discuss next.

Among the ideological fault lines is a clash over the very aim of development. For many critical scholars, contemporary development frameworks (despite their substantial reforms), still fail to reflect the diverse values and worldviews of the pluriverse. While the concept of human development has pushed development policy well beyond an income and resource centred approach, some critics contend that the Capabilities approach rests on ethnocentric claims to universality (Charusheela, 2009). The universalist claims of human development research also appear at odds with calls to recognize the pluriverse (Kothari et al., 2019). Some have voiced concerns over the centrality assigned to the state apparatus in achieving human development, where individual agency is reduced to that of a "client" to be managed, with limited options set by state institutions (Barros and Diniz, 2025; Escobar, 1988). Others have highlighted the lacking consideration of environmental impoverishment in related poverty measures (Martinez-Alier and Rodríguez-Labajos, 2026). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have incorporated a broad range of social and environmental concerns, many of which are considered relevant by (critical) scholars. However, the way these concerns are addressed frequently contrasts with the agendas of grassroots movements that prioritize alternative economies, social and ecological justice, and other ways of being in this world (Kothari et al., 2019). For example, goal 8, which promotes sustainable economic growth, is particularly contradictory and divisive for those who see economic growth beyond a minimum scale as the core problem and not the solution (e.g., Hickel, 2019; Menton et al., 2020).

These rifts also surface in conceptual debates, which expose underlying and often unspoken assumptions. Examples include concepts such as *employment* and *income,* or *externalities*. Conventional development research and policy frequently focus on employment creation as a central objective. I have argued elsewhere that related indicators need to be contextualized within the processes of dispossession and livelihood loss that have accompanied economic transformations such as industrialization (Scheidel 2016). Different paradigms also manifest in how environmental degradation is addressed. Within environmental economics - which intersects with conventional development economics on sustainability concerns - environmental problems are viewed as *externalities* that can be tackled by internalizing them into markets, e.g. through taxes, subsidies, or tradable permits. Ecological Economics largely rejects this view. Scholars have argued that market internalization of externalities is often not sufficient or not possible at all, because of the incommensurability of environmental values with economic values, biophysical limits, irreversible and non-linear tipping points, and other concerns (Martinez-Alier et al., 1998). Furthermore, externalities may reflect not only market failures, but also the result of deliberate cost-shifting processes that transfer social and environmental costs to less powerful actors, who bear the burden without compensation (Villamayor-Tomás and Muradian, 2023). The list of contested terms and their underlying assumptions is long and includes *progress, poverty, developed vs underdeveloped countries, yield gaps* (as discussed later), and so on.

In some cases, terms have also cross-fertilized different schools of thoughts. For example, the distinction of *Global South and North* – a response to the terms *developed and underdeveloped* countries, highlighting geopolitical relations between them (Haug et al., 2021) – has become widely accepted. Concepts such as *environmental justice* that originated from social movements, have become globalized and institutionalized at state levels, although during these processes, were also transformed (Walker, 2009). Did these conceptual integrations strengthen critical agendas or did the concepts lose their original critical prupose and power? These are crucial questions that warrant further reflection within (critical) development studies.

The *Development Studies Divide* is further evident in the distinct audiences that scholars seek to engage. Much of conventional development research aims to inform global and national policy makers to "get the policies right". Political Ecologists and other critical development scholars frequently seek to support local communities, activists, and social movement struggles directly, while regarding state actors as not necessarily aligned with the interests of marginalized groups. The idea of *scholar activism*, which pursues transformative social change for and with groups in vulnerable positions, is gaining increasing traction among critical scholars (Borras and Franco, 2023; 2025). At the same time, linking *science* to *activism* provokes debates in conventional academic fora about whether it violates principles of so-called "value-free" and "objective" science (see e.g, Büntgen (2024) and reply by Anguelovski et al., (2025)). *Participatory action research,* which seeks knowledge creation and social change through the active involvement of local communities, perhaps occupies shared terrain across a wide range of scholars.

Another major fracture lies in the different epistemologies underlying research on development issues. Scholars employing positivist methods, often associated with conventional development approaches, emphasize quantifiable outcomes and objective metrics. In contrast, post-structuralist approaches, aligned with Political Ecology and other critical perspectives, challenge these metrics, highlighting the socially constructed nature of knowledge (e.g., Sletto, 2008), and the importance of knowledge co-production attentive to context, local histories, cultures and values (Hunsberger et al., 2017).[5] The epistemological differences are closely linked to methodological ones. Quantitative global assessments (e.g. of poverty, agricultural development potentials, deforestation, etc.) are much more common in conventional development research, while in-depth qualitative, context-sensitive approaches are more frequent in the critical social sciences. This has provoked heated debates about the limits of global datasets, and the politics and (unspoken) assumptions that have shaped them, as in the case of land

[5] For reflections on how these different epistemological approaches have limited knowledge integration among Land System Science and Political Ecology, both concerned with land and forestry degradation and restoration, see Turner and Robbins, (2008) and Scheidel and Gingrich (2020).

grabbing databases and related discussions about rural development (Edelman, 2013; Scoones et al., 2013). One example is the World Bank (2011) report *Rising Global Interest in Farmland* that addressed whether the global growth in agricultural investments – which others termed land grabbing (Borras et al., 2011) – could benefit global rural development by creating employment, closing yield gaps and raising productivity. The report used advanced quantitative methods for a global assessment. Many critical development scholars saw the results and political implications as highly problematic because the report relied on concepts such as *yield gaps* that involve Western assumptions about agricultural development models, or concepts such as *underutilized land*, which dismissed customary and multifunctional land uses. More generally, the criticism of data-driven studies, commonly voiced in Political Ecology and other fields, stems partly from their historical association with colonialism and the instrumental use of statistics for domination and resource extraction rather than local empowerment (Hayward et al., 2021).

Note that conventional development research has increasingly embraced quantitative methods that aim to capture local context and qualitative details. A prominent example is the growing use of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and quasi-natural experiments to evaluate localized development interventions in education, microfinance, health and other areas. RCTs evaluate their outcomes in specific local settings by randomly assigning treatment and control groups. The trend was popularized by the work of Nobel Laureates Banerjee and Duflo (2012) and RCTs have for some become the new "gold standard" (Webber and Prouse, 2018). However, frictions have emerged here too and scholars have criticized these approaches as ethically and epistemologically problematic (Evans, 2024; Muller, 2024; Cook-Lundgren and Girei, 2025): RCTs have raised concerns over informed consent, may reproduce colonial power relations through the objectification of participants, and privilege Western epistemologies and Eurocentric ideologies and notions of progress. They offer limited insight into causal mechanisms and insufficiently account for intra-group power relations that shape specific outcomes. Finally, they face limits to external validity (Peters et al., 2016), which, as discussed below, also applies to case study research so common in the critical social sciences.

Despite these tensions, the question remains whether quantitative studies could align with the local conceptualizations, values, worldviews and assumptions that go unaccounted for. Many of the questions posed by critical fields tend to exceed the evidentiary capacities of their methods (i.e. localized, case study research, discourse analysis) to create generalizable knowledge claims at larger analytical scales. Could quantitative approaches, well-established in conventional development studies, provide the global evidence needed on where and why development is failing, while framing the problem from the perspective of communities in vulnerable positions?

I contend that a reflexive integration of critical perspectives with quantitative approaches is not only promising but also needed. Political Ecology and other critical social sciences overwhelmingly depend on fine-grained qualitative methods and analyses, aware of local values and livelihood conceptions. While this has produced rich and necessary thick descriptions of place-specific processes and pitfalls of development, these remain isolated case studies that cannot indicate how common the problems they describe are, nor easily speak for the pluriverse of experiences worldwide. In short, qualitative case studies have high internal validity but tell us little about their external validity and the generalizability of observed processes at larger scales. Furthermore, to achieve political impact, quantitative data are useful, as qualitative case research has historically received less attention in policy circles than quantitative data (Porter, 1995). Quantitative approaches may indeed offer global assessments of shared concerns such as poverty, deforestation, environmental change, or land grabbing. However, they meaningless for local communities when their assumptions, concepts, analyses and interpretation draw on ideologies, worldviews and reference frameworks that those communities do not necessarily share.

In this context, a fruitful way forward may be to combine the critical perspectives and concerns voiced by scholars and local communities with quantitative methods for assessing them beyond case study evidence. Such combinations could generate novel, socially meaningful, and methodologically rigorous approaches and data for addressing major challenges in ways that respond to critical concerns. In fact, critical scholarship has not remained static either: some scholars have taken up data sources and data-driven methods far more common in conventional development approaches. Research combining Political Ecology concerns with quantitative assessments - drawing on both conventional and alternative global data sources - includes studies of the determinants of repression against environmental activists (Le Billon and Lujala, 2020). Others have critically assessed the role of trade and the upstream global appropriation of resources in international material inequality (Schaffartzik et al., 2019), and quantified unequal exchange and imperialist appropriations of resources and labour globally (Hickel et al., 2022). As part of the global Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas) initiative, we ourselves to sought to generate global evidence from knowledge co-production to address diverse, critical questions over development processes and impacts (e.g., Temper et al. 2018; Scheidel et al., 2023; Walter et al., 2026).

Much remains to be done and learned. Applying quantitative methods to longstanding qualitative debates demands a methodological pluralism that chooses methods, data and concepts to suit the addressed concern rather than the tradition. This requires critical and transparent reflections about underlying assumptions, biases, data limitations, history of data sources and uses, transparency about positionalities, and awareness of the political implications of large assessments for different social groups and for global debates. Such methodological pluralism may involve deep epistemological and methodological challenges and frictions within scholarly communities. Yet it is worth the effort, as the result will be not only original research but also a profound learning process across different communities across the *Development Studies Divide*.

4. Concluding remarks

This *Insight* has revisited what I have termed the *Development Studies Divide*: the frictions that have emerged across disciplines in ongoing debates about development. Without aiming for comprehensiveness, and mindful of the vast spectrum of perspectives it can only touch upon, it has sought to illustrate some of the ruptures across normative stances, ideologies, concepts, epistemologies and methodologies. The aim of this article, however, has not been to deepen these divides but to foster reflection on ongoing differences and stimulate discussion on how to address pressing social and environmental challenges in original, comprehensive, and socially meaningful ways.

I have contended that mutual learning, particularly in methodology, is both promising and urgently needed. Many of the questions posed by critical traditions often exceed the evidence-building capacities of their methods, while the tools of conventional development sometimes operate within too narrow a problem space. Not all ongoing differences are oppositional; some represent complementarity worth exploring further. Integrating critical qualitative perspectives with quantitative approaches offers significant potential. Such integration could, on one hand, substantiate critical claims about alternatives to development, often based on isolated case studies or predominantly normative and theoretical discussions. On the other hand, it could provide a necessary corrective to data-driven global analyses, which become problematic when their assumptions, design and interpretations are not grounded in the diverse histories, worldviews, and values of non-Western realities. Methodological cross-fertilization can therefore advance (critical) development studies toward an epistemologically and conceptually reflective, methodologically pluralistic approach to the complex social and environmental challenges of our time.

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Arnim Scheidel: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

I have used *Claude* Opus 5 (Anthropic) for language editing and proofreading. After using this tool, I reviewed and edited all content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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